



## **Senators want troops to wear masks to protect from toxic fumes**

By Adam Levine  
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Washington (CNN) -- Two senators asked the Department of Defense Wednesday to provide respirator masks to all troops in Afghanistan and Iraq who are exposed to potentially toxic fumes from open air garbage pits in the war zones.

In a letter to Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, Sens. Charles Schumer, D-New York, and Bill Nelson, D-Florida, urged that the masks become a requirement to help protect troop health from the garbage pits, known as burn pits.

"If the use of burn pits is a military necessity in a particular circumstance, safety in the form of protective respirator masks should be an automatic requirement for any troops who risk being exposed to these potential toxins," the senators wrote. "These masks can, at a minimum, serve to mitigate the harm being cause by these burn pits."

The senators wrote the letter after learning of the death of Army Sgt. William McKenna, who was from New York and lived in Florida, from a cancer linked to the fumes he was exposed to while on duty in Iraq, the senators wrote. McKenna was 41 years old.

Prior to an initial outcry about the pits, the largest base in Iraq was burning everything from hazardous waste, medical waste and plastics, using jet fuel as accelerant, according to military documents. The resulting smoke spewed over the living quarters and the base hospital, exposing thousands of troops.

A report last fall from the Government Accountability Office found that the pits, used on some bases in Iraq and Afghanistan, are burning items "such as plastic, that generate harmful emissions" despite regulations forbidding it.

The emissions have been the source of controversy, as troops complained about a host of problems from cancerous tumors to respiratory issues and blamed exposure to the burn pits, while military officials denied any consequential effects on most troops.

The Department of Veterans Affairs has since acknowledged the health concerns and the Defense Department has tried to limit the use where possible.

The military, the report concluded, has been slow in using alternatives and has not considered the long-term costs of dealing with the resulting health issues that occur.